

Dialectical v. Di-Polar Theology

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I

We seek the emergence of an encompassing vision which seemingly now lies beyond us, and I am fully persuaded that it will transcend everything which is now manifest as either dialectical or di-polar understanding. No doubt my way of seeking it is very different from process thought, such as that expressed in the writings of John B. Cobb, Jr., but this does not preclude the possibility that Cobb's di-polar theological understanding cannot only challenge but also enrich a quest for total dialectical understanding and vision. At this stage we must seek clarity as to the actual difference between our respective quests and more particularly seek to unveil the fundamental relation between our respective categories. Cobb's method is more open theologically to particular and individual centers of consciousness than is my own, and this makes possible for him a pragmatic engagement and concern which is foreign to my way of theological thinking. But from my own point of view this closes his method to either the possibility or the actuality of a total mode of vision and experience and therefore confines his theological horizon to what I must judge to be an inverted and fallen world of experience. Once we concede an ultimate otherness of reality-in-itself, then we must finally be either prisoners or victims of that reality, with no possibility of either making or realizing an ultimate self or life-affirmation.

The anthropocentrism to which I am committed locates all reality in, and in relation to, consciousness and experience. This commitment refuses any reality whatsoever to that which is other than consciousness or experience. Nevertheless, a fundamental question arises as to the identity of consciousness and experience. While in one sense it is correct to identify this consciousness and experience as a human phenomenon, in another sense it is not; for a total vision, or a quest for it, must negate and oppose every isolated and particular expression of experience, and therefore it must set itself against everything which is given or immediately present to us as consciousness or experience. To speak of a total vision from the perspective of a particular and individual mode of consciousness is to speak of that which is other than our consciousness and experience. No way lies present to us of a total vision apart from a negation of ourselves, a negation which is a radical uprooting of everything which is individually and personally our own. Only such a negation of our given and individual identity and reality can annul the otherness of the other. For the totality of consciousness and experience cannot appear and be real until its particular and individual ground is negated and transcended.

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Accordingly, a total vision must refuse the ultimacy and finality of all individual and particular experience, and therefore it must refuse the finality of what happens to an individual man, including what Cobb speaks of as his lonely suffering and death. While that suffering cannot *in itself* be a self-unfolding of Geist, it does not follow that it has no direct bearing on the movement and evolution of Spirit. What Hegel termed the "labor" of the negative is precisely the mode of the actualization and realization of Spirit, and apart from pain and suffering there would be no movement or activity. A total vision calls us to a realization that our suffering and death are not solely and only our own and that to confine it to an individual and particular identity and meaning is to refuse the presence and reality of Spirit. What does Cobb or the di-polar realist mean when he says that the suffering and death of the individual has importance in and for itself? The latter phrase could be Hegelian, and it could mean that suffering and death are finally important only insofar as their particular factuality is transcended by an all-encompassing expression and experience. At this point I see a parallel between Hegelian and Whiteheadian modes of understanding, for surely something like this is comprehended in Whitehead's doctrine of the consequent nature of God. Yet the Hegelian mode of understanding is here more theologically radical than its Whiteheadian counterpart, for it demands that the fullness of Spirit be present in the "labor" of the negative and refuses and negates that form or identity of Spirit which is in-itself and apart. Is the affirmation of the ultimate importance of individual suffering and death theologically inseparable from an affirmation of the primordial and transcendent nature of God? Is an affirmation of the original and primordial identity of God inseparable from an acceptance of or a submission to the finality and solitude of individual suffering and death?

If di-polar thought truly places its stress upon the primacy of concern for the actual and particular, then it may be thereby closing itself to the encompassing vision which we seek. Moreover, if primacy is also or therefore given to the ultimate reality of the non-conscious, then it may thereby be placing its hope upon a reality which is indifferent to human affirmation and experience. Is Cobb committed to a necessary and unchanging relation between actuality and otherness? If there is no experience that is not experience of something other than itself, does this mean that the subject of experience is necessarily and eternally bound to its objective pole?

At this point it is unavoidable that we cast a glance at Whitehead's understanding of experience. In the conclusion of his chapter on the subjectivist principle in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead states that the way in which one actual entity is qualified by other actual entities is the "experience" of the actual world enjoyed by that actual entity, as subject.

The subjectivist principle is that the whole universe consists of elements disclosed in the analysis of the experiences of subjects. Process is the becoming of experience. It follows that the philosophy of organism entirely accepts the subjectivist bias of modern philosophy. It also accepts Hume's doctrine that nothing is to be received into the philosophical scheme which is not discoverable as an element in subjective experience. This is the ontological principle. (PR 252f)

Actual entities are the final real things of which the world is made, and White-

head's ontological principle can be summarized as: no actual entity, then no reason for anything whatsoever. (PR 27f) Actual entities or actual occasions are subjects insofar as they are present and objects only insofar as they are past. And Whitehead can summarize his own reformed subjectivist principle as follows: "that apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness." (PR 254)

In the Preface to *Process and Reality*, after having stated that his philosophy is a recurrence to pre-Kantian modes of thought, Whitehead asks if his cosmology is not a transformation of some main doctrines of Absolute Idealism onto a realistic basis. Now, after having presented his reformed subjectivist principle, Whitehead forthrightly affirms that the final analogy of his philosophy to philosophies of the Hegelian school is not accidental.

The universe is at once the multiplicity of *rēs verae* and the solidarity of *rēs verae*. The solidarity is itself the efficiency of the macrocosmic *res vera*, embodying the principle of unbounded permanence acquiring novelty through flux. The multiplicity is composed of microcosmic *rēs verae*, each embodying the principle bounded flux acquiring "everlasting" permanence. On one side, the one becomes many; and on the other side, the many become one. But *what* becomes is always a *res vera*, and the concrescence of a *res vera* is the development of a subjective aim. This development is nothing else than the Hegelian development of an idea. (PR 254)

Although Whitehead confessed in 1931 that he lacked firsthand acquaintance with Hegel, he also stated that he had been influenced by the British neo-Hegelians, and Gregory Vlastos interprets his philosophy as a unique variant of the Hegelian dialectic. (1:253-62) May we ask to what extent Whitehead's understanding of subject and experience parallels Hegel's understanding of the mutual and reciprocal relation between subject and object?

Whitehead presented a compelling portrait of his own search for ultimate meaning in the conclusion of the fifth chapter of *Science and the Modern World*. First, he identifies any purely religious or theological answer to the question of the ultimate meaning of the order and reality of nature as the great refusal of rationality to assert its rights. He insists that we have to search as to whether nature does not in its very being "show" itself as self-explanatory. By this he means that the very statement of *what* things are may contain elements explanatory of *why* things are. Then, after noting that "value" is the word he uses for the intrinsic reality of an event, he says:

Value is the outcome of limitation. The definite finite entity is the selected mode which is the shaping of attainment; apart from such shaping into individual matter of fact there is no attainment. The mere fusion of all that there is would be the nonentity of indefiniteness. The salvation of reality is its obstinate, irreducible, matter-of-fact entities, which are limited to be no other than themselves. (SMW 136f)

There following, in the brief chapter on God, Whitehead states that there cannot be value without antecedent standards of value, and thus there is required a metaphysical principle of limitation. The apparent irrational limitation of actual occasions or actual entities has a ground for which no reason can be given, for all reason flows from it.

God is the ultimate limitation, and His existence is the ultimate irrationality. For no reason can be given for just that limitation which it stands in His nature to

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impose. God is not concrete, but He is the ground for concrete actuality. No reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality. (SMW 257)

Without doubt, Whitehead's philosophy does embody a seemingly strange and startling conjunction of what had previously been manifest in Western thinking as the wholly diverse and mutually contradictory movements of realism and idealism, and perhaps his greatest historical importance will prove to be that he brought these opposing streams together. Who could fail to be moved by Whitehead's radically challenging conjunction if not identification of matter-of-fact entities and subjective experience? Whitehead's cosmology itself is concerned with the becoming, the being, and the relatedness of such actual entities or *rēs verae*. And therein he reaches a metaphysical understanding of creative process as the becoming, the perishing, and the objective immortalization of those things which jointly constitute what he terms *stubborn fact*. As he says in the Preface to *Process and Reality*:

All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living—that is to say, with "objective immortality" whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming. (PR ix)

Although every actual occasion must perish, it perishes by the subject of the occasion becoming object or by the transition of the present into the past. Yet every occasion (or each fluent actual occasion) is also completed by passing into objective immortality, wherein it is everlasting, and is thus devoid of perpetual perishing. Cosmology, in this sense, is claimed by Whitehead to be the basis of all religions. Indeed, "everlastingness" (the "many" absorbed everlastingly in the final unity) is the actual content of that vision out of which the higher religions historically evolved. Thus, in the closing pages of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead gives us something like an eschatological vision:

God and the World stand over against each other, expressing the final metaphysical truth that appetitive vision and physical enjoyment have equal claim to priority in creation. But no two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all. Thus each temporal occasion embodies God, and is embodied in God. In God's nature, permanence is primordial and flux is derivative from the World: in the World's nature, flux is primordial and permanence is derivative from God. Also the World's nature is a primordial datum from God; and God's nature is a primordial datum for the World. Creation achieves the reconciliation of permanence and flux when it has reached its final term which is everlastingness—the Apotheosis of the World. (PR 529)

God and the World are the contrasted opposites in terms of which the creative process achieves its goal. Every temporal occasion embodies God, and God embodies every temporal occasion. Nor may we lose sight of the claim that matter-of-fact entities or *stubborn fact* constitute those actual occasions which embody God. Only in this sense is the "salvation" of reality its obstinate, irreducible, matter-of-fact entities, which are limited to be no other than themselves. (SMW 137)

May we say that God and the World are here mutually and reciprocally related in an Hegelian manner and mode? Or, otherwise phrased, is Whitehead's

objective immortality the cosmological and organic equivalent of Hegel's absolute negativity? Is Whitehead's understanding of subject and experience a metaphysical conceptualization of the Hegelian process of self-negation? Or, otherwise stated, is Whitehead's cosmological reconciliation of permanence and flux at bottom identical with Hegel's dialectical reconciliation of subjectivity and objectivity? Does Hegel's "labor" of the negative find cosmological expression in Whitehead's ontological principle? Is the Whiteheadian "subject" finally identical with the Hegelian "subject," and the Whiteheadian *rēs verae* finally identical with the Hegelian "substance"? Is, then, the reformed subjectivist principle of Whitehead *finally* identical with the Hegelian principle that subject and object mutually and reciprocally determine each other? These questions take us far beyond the present state of our discussion, and I suspect that the present stage of philosophical development is not yet prepared to answer or even perhaps properly to formulate such questions. Yet in some sense they lie as an inescapable background for any dialogue between di-polar and dialectical theology, and it is possible that it is just such a dialogue which can provide an authentic mode of entry into these questions.

Certainly, from this point of view, di-polar theology has only begun the process of constructing a theological conceptualization of Whitehead's philosophy. It is also possible that it has been premature in even its tentative constructions and lies in danger of giving Whitehead a too limited and provincial meaning. At the very least a genuine correlation of Whitehead and Hegel would establish the possibility that the full movement of Western thinking is present in Whitehead's philosophy, and that his philosophy is just as much a fulfillment of that thinking as it is a challenge to it. I am intrigued that it is just those theological categories which lie at the center of Hegelian thinking which Cobb repudiates or minimizes, and I cannot refrain from posing the fundamental question as to whether or not a fuller Whiteheadian mode of understanding might establish the centrality of these categories in di-polar theology. For my own part, I cannot imagine how di-polar theology could be genuinely Christian so long as it places christology and eschatology at the periphery of faith and understanding, nor can I see how it could ever gain real relevance or power so long as it continues to be unable either to address us or to speak in terms of the imagination. Clearly at these points and others di-polar theology stands to gain immensely by the employment of Hegelian dialectical thinking. The question remains as to what extent this thinking is compatible with the Whiteheadian ground of di-polar theology.

II

Is it inevitable that di-polar theology must subordinate christology to other doctrines? Must di-polar theology by necessity subordinate its understanding of Christ to its understanding of God? Must that which it can conceptually understand as God determine the limits of that which it can theologially conceive as Christ? Is there, then, no mutual and reciprocal relation between that which a di-polar theology knows as God and that which it knows or can know as Christ?

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Indeed, is the understanding of God in di-polar theology fully and wholly metaphysical, or is it also, and in some fundamental and specific sense, theological? Is the Whiteheadian distinction between the primordial and the consequent natures of God a purely metaphysical distinction which has no genuine or truly christological ground? Or is it possible that the understanding of God in di-polar theology has both a metaphysical and a theological or christological ground? For example, Whitehead himself, in introducing his chapter on God in *Science and the Modern World*, says that Aristotle was the last European metaphysician of first-rate importance who was entirely dispassionate in his understanding of God. Whitehead even doubts whether any properly general metaphysics can ever, without the "illicit" introduction of other considerations, get much further than Aristotle. (SMW 249f) Whitehead obviously attempts to go further than Aristotle and does so most particularly in his understanding of actuality as through and through togetherness—"togetherness of otherwise isolated eternal objects, and togetherness of all actual occasions." (SMW 251) Is such a metaphysical understanding of togetherness reached by an "illicit" introduction of a specifically Christian mode of understanding?

Whitehead says that it is important for his argument to insist upon the unbounded freedom within which the actual is a unique categorical determination. God is the ground for concrete actuality. But no reason can be given for the nature of God, because that nature is the ground of rationality. Here we reach the limit of rationality. As Whitehead says in the penultimate paragraph of this chapter on God:

For there is a categorical limitation which does not spring from any metaphysical reason. There is a metaphysical need for a principle of determination, but there can be no metaphysical reason for what is determined. If there were such a reason, there would be no need for any further principle: for metaphysics would already have provided the determination. The general principle of empiricism depends upon the doctrine that there is a principle of concretion which is not discoverable by abstract reason. What further can be known about God must be sought in the region of particular experiences, and therefore rests on an empirical basis. (SMW 257)

Mankind has differed profoundly, as Whitehead notes, in respect to the interpretation of these experiences. Every historical name of God, whether that name be religious or metaphysical, corresponds to a system of thought derived from the actual and empirical experiences of those who have used it. Does it not then follow that the Whiteheadian name and conception of God derives from a "system" of thought with a uniquely Christian empirical and historical ground?

If this is so, then it would appear that the understanding of God in di-polar theology does indeed have a specifically and uniquely theological ground. But a specifically and uniquely theological ground, as opposed to a general and universal metaphysical or natural theological ground, can be named as christological, that is to say it can be identified as having an essential and necessary relation to the name and event which the Christian knows as Christ. It could even be said that Whitehead goes far beyond most theologians in insisting upon the empirical and historical basis of *all* knowledge about God. Theologically considered, however, should we not identify such an empirical and historical basis as christological? If abstract reason cannot discover such a principle of concretion, and

if it must be sought in the region of particular experiences, then must not that experience be indissolubly linked, at least symbolically, with the actual and historical name of Christ? At least from this perspective, Whitehead's understanding of God has a christological ground, and this also means that his understanding of actuality and actual occasions has a necessary and inevitable christological ground. Therefore Whitehead's cosmology is not simply or only a metaphysical cosmology, it is also a christological cosmology, for the "togetherness" which it establishes between otherwise isolated eternal objects and actual occasions is a togetherness which is manifest only in the region of a particular and specifically Christian experience.

But is it not also possible that Whitehead's understanding of God is christological in the sense that it is in large measure an understanding of what the Christian specifically names as Christ? At this point the eschatological question becomes paramount, and I proceed with the theological conviction that the Christian names of Christ and the Kingdom of God are integrally and necessarily related to each other. Already I have suggested that the conclusion of *Process and Reality* gives us something like an eschatological vision. Now I wish to suggest that what Whitehead conceives as the consequent nature of God is a metaphysical conceptualization of what the Christian symbolically names as Christ. Not only is it true that the idea of the consequent nature of God is metaphysically dependent upon a particular historical tradition, but I would also suggest the possibility that it is directed wholly and without remainder to what the Christian, and only the Christian, has known as the total and final presence of God in Christ. Notice how careful Whitehead is, in the conclusion of *Process and Reality*, to distinguish a Christian or Galilean vision of God from the dominant forms of Western theism. These dominant theisms have fashioned God in the image of an imperial ruler, in the image of a personification of moral energy, or in the image of an ultimately philosophical principle.

The history of theistic philosophy exhibits various stages of combination of these three diverse ways of entertaining the problem. There is, however, in the Galilean origin of Christianity yet another suggestion which does not fit well with any of the three main strands of thought. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to morals. It does not look to the future; for it finds its own reward in the immediate present. (PR 520f)

So far from being the transcendent Creator, or the "eminently real," God is love and is a love which not only actualizes itself but also "completes" itself in an apotheosis of the world. Are we not here in the presence of a fully eschatological and fully christological vision of God?

In *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead says that there are three great systems of thought, Buddhism, Christianity, and science. Whereas Buddhism is a metaphysic generating a religion, Christianity has always been a religion seeking a metaphysic. Christianity starts with a tremendous notion about the world, and this notion is not derived from a metaphysical doctrine, but rather from our comprehension of the sayings and actions of Christ. What is primary in religion

is the religious fact. The Buddha left a tremendous doctrine, but Christianity is grounded in the "tremendous fact" of Christ. (RM 51) The reported sayings of Christ are not formularized thought, but rather descriptions of direct insight. He speaks in the lowest abstractions that language is capable of, and his sayings are actions and not adjustments of concepts.

In the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Parables, there is no reasoning about the facts. They are seen with immeasurable innocence. Christ represents rationalism derived from direct intuition and divorced from dialectics.

The life of Christ is not an exhibition of over-ruling power. Its glory is for those who can discern it, and not for the world. Its power lies in the absence of force. It has the decisiveness of a supreme ideal, and that is why the history of the world divides at this point of time. (RM 57)

It is precisely in the life of Christ that there first appears a power lying in the absence of force, and although historic Christianity has again and again negated and reversed that power, it is in the development and expression of that power that the true destiny of Christianity lies.

Is not Whitehead's doctrine of God, and more particularly his doctrine of the consequent nature of God, a conceptual development and expression of that power? We also must not fail to observe that in *Religion in the Making* Whitehead presents a doctrine of God which at least in part incorporates the eschatological proclamation of Jesus. In speaking therein on the contribution of religion to metaphysics—and he identifies this contribution as the realization of the togetherness or the interdependence of the universe—he says:

The world is at once a passing shadow and a final fact. The shadow is passing into the fact, so as to be constitutive of it; and yet the fact is prior to the shadow. There is a kingdom of heaven prior to the actual passage of actual things, and there is the same kingdom finding its completion through the accomplishment of this passage. (RM 87)

This kingdom is in the world, yet not of the world; it transcends the natural world, but so does the world transcend the kingdom of heaven. Then, in the last chapter, in the section on the nature of God, Whitehead says that the kingdom of heaven is God. God is the "ideal companion" who transmutes what has been lost into a living fact within his own nature.

The kingdom of heaven is not the isolation of good from evil. It is the overcoming of evil by good. This transmutation of evil into good enters into the actual world by reason of the inclusion of the nature of God, which includes the ideal vision of each actual evil so met with a novel consequent as to issue in the restoration of goodness. (RM 155)

Could we not say that this understanding of God is grounded in Christ, and not only in the sayings of Christ but also in the Cross, and in the Cross as a universal and forward-moving process of atonement?

Yet another clue to this meaning of God is contained in Whitehead's initial definition of religion in *Religion in the Making*:

Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness. It runs through three stages, if it evolves to its final satisfaction. It is the transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion. (RM 16f)

The great religious conceptions which haunt the imagination are scenes of

solitariness: Prometheus chained to his rock, Mahomet brooding in the desert, the meditations of the Buddha, and the solitary Man on the Cross. Surely this last image is the one which most decisively affected Whitehead religiously, and he can even say that: "It belongs to the depth of the religious spirit to have felt forsaken, even by God." (RM 20) Despite appearances to the contrary, there is good reason to suspect that Whitehead at bottom was a twice-born soul, and I suspect that those di-polar theologians who are once-born or healthy-minded souls are at least in part responsible for a fundamental distortion of Whitehead's theological meaning. I also suspect that only a theological understanding of the transition in religious experience from an apprehension of God the enemy to God the companion can preserve the imaginative power of a Whiteheadian understanding of God in the context of the twentieth century. If God is completed by the passage of shadow into fact, could we not also say that God the companion only appears after the disappearance of God the enemy? And is not the image of God the companion derived not only from the sayings of Christ but also from the Cross, and from the image and the appearance of the *solitary Man on the Cross?* (RM 20)

At the very least a non-Whiteheadian theologian can entertain the supposition that Whitehead's conception of the consequent nature of God has both a christological and an eschatological ground. Moreover, it is conceivable that this mode of metaphysical or theological understanding represents and embodies a synthesis or coming together of eschatology and christology. It is surely possible to think that Whitehead's understanding of the consequent nature of God or the kingdom of heaven is implicitly if partially grounded in a genuine eschatology, and is so because it apprehends a transmutation of evil into good by way of a cosmic and universal process. God becomes ever more fully all in all, and he does so by way of a progressive incarnation of himself in the world, an incarnation which culminates in an apotheosis of the world. This mode of vision appears to be related to that of Eastern Christianity, and if so it suggests that Whitehead's employment of Plato has a fully religious ground, just as it also suggests that Whitehead's doctrine of the consequent nature of God is a metaphysical *and* theological conceptualization of the universal, and cosmic, and forward-moving Christ.

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